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ABSTRACT

An academic advisory board of volunteers drawn from college alumni and the general community can serve institutions of higher education at the college, school and even departmental level. Board members link the academic community to the external community by sharing expertise gained through practical experience. Such a board exists solely to give advice, not to set policy or raise money. Volunteers are honored by the invitation to participate, and it enables them to make a valuable contribution to the improvement of academic programs. While the chief officer of the academic unit that the board serves should direct it, a board should be able to function as independently as possible. The most effective board is composed not only of alumni, whose perspective is framed by their prior academic experiences, but also of outside members of the community. Candidates should be formally solicited for a 3-year term, with a third of the terms expiring each year. Especially valuable members may be designated "advisor emeritus" and retained for longer terms. A number of standing committees may need to be designated to address topics of special concern. Meetings should be scheduled well in advance, and with consideration for board members' other commitments. A memento of recognition, such as a certificate, provides a visible and lasting acknowledgment honoring each board member's participation. (JSP)

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ADVISORY BOARDS: ACADEMIC PARTNERSHIPS THAT WORK

by

Gerald Silver

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ADVISORY BOARDS: ACADEMIC PARTNERSHIPS THAT WORK

by Gerald Silver

Virtually all universities and colleges now solicit financial support from their alumni through a variety of formalized and structured procedures, but how many similarly approach their alumni and other supporters for advice, particularly advice pertaining to academic areas?

By creating advisory boards of volunteers drawn from the alumni body as well as from other segments of its public, any branch of the academic administration can tap the expertise of people whose valuable insights might otherwise be unavailable at any price. My positive experiences working with academic advisory boards at both a large state university and a small private college have led me to believe that these boards can work well at the level of the college, school, or even department.

WHAT THE BOARD DOES

In the broadest sense, the board members link the academic community to the external community by sharing the expertise and insights they have achieved through their life and work experience. Students, faculty, and administrators alike all stand to benefit from the existence of a board composed of people who possess knowledge gained through practical experience in a given field. The board members can serve as role models and counselors for students who need information about careers. They can help the faculty to identify topics that may be worthy of scholarly research, and they can help the faculty to update and upgrade their professional skills. They can help administrators and faculty to restructure the curriculum to insure that it meets current needs in the marketplace. They can help bring speakers to campus or to place representatives of the institution before significant audiences off campus.

WHAT THE BOARD DOESN'T DO

It is important to establish at the outset that boards exist to give advice -- and solely to give advice. If everyone understands that boards have no practical power to set policy or pass judgment on personnel matters, then the board will be perceived as an asset to the institution. Potential members will understand that by serving on the board they will not be dragged into discussions of delicate issues, and that people within your institution who are not on the board will not feel threatened by it. Of

course, to the extent that the board delivers sound advice, its power can be considerable -- but that power can be exercised only through the dean or department chair whom the advisory board serves.

It also is important to ensure that the board is not perceived as being just a clever way to disguise a fund raising activity. Potential board members should understand that the institution holds a sincere interest in their ideas, not their money. This issue -- the nature of their involvement with the institution through service on the board -- must be approached with a considerable degree of sophistication. On the one hand, do not risk incurring the wrath of the institution's development officers by communicating to your board members the idea that their service is in lieu of any financial support from them. On the other, do not alienate board members by suggesting to them that financial support is expected because of their service on the board. As it happens, many alumni who are most suited for membership on academic advisory boards also will turn out to be the same alumni who already are staunch supporters of the annual fund and capital projects, or who are prime prospects for such fund raising activities. As it happens, the positive experiences that alumni and others will enjoy by virtue of their board service often will give rise to financial support. As an academic officer, it is important to resist the temptation to use the advisory board as a vehicle for raising money.

WHY MEMBERS SERVE

What motivates people to volunteer their services as members of an academic advisory board? To begin with, it's an honor to be asked to serve; selecting people for service on a board, provides a public statement that they have distinguished themselves in some fashion, and that their thoughts are worthy of widespread attention. Among alumni who feel a sense of gratitude to the institution that stems from their days as students, their service on a board will allow them to express their thanks in a significant way. If they feel a sense of satisfaction from their work in the field they have entered, their service on a board will allow them to help others have a similar experience. If they hope to reform or improve the quality of the academic program so that it better meets contemporary needs, their service will allow them to make suggestions that could lead to meaningful change.

WHO DIRECTS THE BOARD

The chief academic officer of the institution must stand solidly behind the idea of having one or more advisory boards, but the chief officer of the academic unit that an advisory board serves is the ideal person to direct it. No one else within an institution is in a better position to know the precise needs of the unit and the ways in which a board may best be of service. Once the nucleus of the board is established, the academic administrator would do well to take a step or two away from the board and allow the volunteers to begin performing the service for which they have been recruited: giving advice. It may be desirable to appoint or elect a president of the board and allow that person to carry out as many administrative functions as he or she is willing to undertake. The primary danger that results from over-direction of the board by the administration is that the discussions that could prove most fruitful may never take place. Give the board the freedom to follow the lines of thought that seem most promising to them; pleasantly surprising results may follow.

HOW TO ORGANIZE A BOARD

Newcomers to institutions are not likely to have prior knowledge of the institution's alumni of accomplishment. Making the acquaintance of experienced administrators in the institution's alumni office is a good way to start; if these people don't have the needed information in their heads, it's undoubtedly in their files. Senior faculty can also prove to be an equally valuable resource for identifying potential board members, as many successful alumni have a habit of keeping in touch with their favorite professors. Trustees and other administrators undoubtedly know many other candidates.

Even if it is possible to assemble your board entirely from the alumni body, my experience lead me to advise against it. Alumni have a perspective framed by their experiences as students, but theirs is not the only one. To achieve maximum flexibility and freshness of insight, strive for a healthy mixture of alumni and non-alumni. People looking at an institution from the outside will often perceive it quite differently from those on the inside; the differing perspectives of non-alumni may serve the valuable purpose of keeping your board's discussions in perspective.

Having identified potential members, make their personal acquaintance. After sending the candidate a brief letter of intent (See Figure 1) follow it up with a

personal visit. After a core of board members is in place, it should become easier to recruit other members. (i.e. enlist their aid in approaching new candidates.)

FIGURE 1

OHIO UNIVERSITY
COLLEGE OF BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION
COPELAND HALL
ATHENS, OHIO 45701

OFFICE OF THE DEAN TELEPHONE 614-594-5446

November 13, 197

The College of Business Administration at Ohio University is concerned with the preparation of students for professional careers in business, and for the continuance of their educational pursuits in graduate studies and professional schools. Its curricula are founded in the liberal arts and its courses stress the conceptual approach to the understanding of business principles and practices.

The College maintains a close relationship with its business community. Guests from leading companies are frequent speakers at student forums and opportunities are provided for cooperative work experiences, as well as for student contact with businessmen and women. All of these essential ancillary activities are integrated with the academic purposes of the College, resulting in a healthy blend of formal training with the practicing world of business.

Senior executives from major organizations are being asked to participate in semi-annual meetings (see attached preliminary program). It means a great deal to the College to have the backing of a devoted group of men and women who subscribe to our seven objectives. We appreciate their efforts and depend upon their help and guidance in providing our business students with such vital education-business experience.

We would like to invite you to join our Board of Visitors for a three-year term, September 1978 - June 1981. I will call you to discuss the Board in greater detail.

Sincerely,

Gerald Silver
Dean

GS/mc
Encl.

I recommend appointing all members to a term with a fixed length; a term of three years to be reasonable for all parties. It is long enough to allow members to gain a real understanding of the institution and then make meaningful contributions, but it is short enough to permit either side to exit with grace. Establish terms of office so that a third of them expire each year; this will guarantee that the board has an annual influx of fresh ideas. In the case of members who prove to be especially valuable, it is possible to create the designation of advisor emeritus and invite them to future meetings with voice, but without vote.

Depending on the size and expertise of the board and the breadth of the academic area for which it has responsibility, it may be helpful to designate a number of standing or ad hoc committees to address topics of special concern.

WHEN TO MEET, WHAT TO DO

Ideally, the board should meet as often as necessary. However, because board members are primarily volunteers who must give up a day at the office, laboratory, or library in order to serve on the board, meetings can be held only as often as is practical. A day-long meeting of the full board once per term may be the most feasible arrangement. If meetings are held on Fridays, traveling will be easier for members coming from a distance and the group will have the opportunity to continue discussions Saturday morning. (See Figure 2) So that students and faculty alike may benefit from the board's presence, avoid conflicts with vacation or examination periods.

FIGURE 2

Sample Schedule

Friday

8:30 - 9 a.m.	Coffee, juice, danish
9:00 - 10 a.m.	General session for full board
10:15 - 11:45 a.m.	Committee meetings
Noon - 2 p.m.	Lunch (board and students only)
2:15 - 4 p.m.	Discipline-based meetings
4:00 - 5:30 p.m.	Free time
5:30 - 6:45 p.m.	Reception at president's house for board, guests
7:00 -	Banquet for board and faculty.

Saturday

8:30 - 9:30 a.m.	Breakfast (by committees or disciplines) for board, faculty, students
9:45 - 11:00 a.m.	Committee reports
11:45 - 1:00 p.m.	Buffet luncheon for board, faculty
1:15 -	Social event.

To keep volunteers' interest sharp, schedule activities that offer both intellectual and social stimulation without being overly taxing, physically or mentally. The accompanying sample schedule is modeled after one we followed at Ohio University. We were fortunate (or so many of us thought) to be able to offer an Ohio University football game as the culminating social event for our fall meeting -- but participation in a well-planned meeting that leads to positive outcomes for both the institution and the community is often all that need be offered.

THE CERTIFICATE: A TOUCH OF CLASS

A memento of recognition, of appreciation, is appropriate, linking the board member with the college. We also want to ensure that this symbol is visible, a reminder of our relationship, not only to the board member but to visitors to home or office. A look in the drawer, in the closet, on the desk, on the wall will quickly indicate which items are prized. Framed certificates, of degree or diploma quality, with the honoree's name professionally inscribed are likely to achieve the desired results.

FIGURE 3

Quinnipiac College
SCHOOL OF BUSINESS
Board of Visitors

John C. Honor

Dedicated to assisting the School of Business achieve excellence in education, serve the community, and provide opportunities for interaction among faculty, students, and business practitioners.

QUINNIPIAC COLLEGE
HAMDEN, CONNECTICUT

Dean, School of Business

COMMON PROBLEMS AND HOW TO AVOID THEM

A meeting was scheduled, hardly anyone came.

Strive for maximum participation by scheduling meetings well in advance. A measure of success is two-thirds of the members attending each meeting. Therefore, if you want twenty board members at each meeting, have a roster of thirty.

Is there an optimum size?

If the board meets with faculty neither group should overwhelm or underwhelm. Strive for a collegial relationship: getting to know each other as individuals.

The relationship is established, mature, successful. When have agenda items been exhausted?

As alumni, parents, employers of your graduates, board members have a thirst for knowledge about the institution they serve. Presentations by students, athletic director, admissions officer, coach, outstanding faculty (artist, author, scientist, teacher) continue to fascinate visitors. The perspective of the president, academic vice president, or trustee at least annually allow the board to see the "big picture" as well as recognize their own importance to the overall institution. Also, if the officers canvas the membership, substantive agenda items often surface.

CONCLUSION

Rarely are successful people unwilling to give of their time or talent if they perceive their participation as value added to collegiate education. Business persons, engineers, artists, teachers, scientists, psychologists, journalists - the list is endless. Synergies of the partnership are often remarkable, almost always surpassing expectations. The will to make friends is sufficient motivation to launch successful relationships. Each succeeding step is easier. There aren't too many academic ventures that almost guarantee results. This is one of them.

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